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ABSTRACT

To encourage students of an upper division writing class to recognize the nuances of voice or tone in their written work, one instructor began the first day of each class by discussing voice and tone. After the instructor reviewed their first-day writings, students were paired with a peer partner. At the end of each semester students were requested to comment about their peer review experience in their dialogue journals. After this peer pairing, many form lasting relationships based on the similarities of their experiences and interests. Beyond these similarities, however, the voices that can be heard are confident, with a confirmed belief in their abilities. Whether the students are accomplished writers or developing writers, nearly all of them have extremely positive feelings about the process and their mutual contributions to the peer pair. The significance of voice can be demonstrated by encouraging students to listen to their partner's written voice to find their own. (CR)

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The Power of the Written Voice

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While we recognize the power of language to evoke strong emotion, to persuade and to communicate information, the power is depleted if we do not listen to the language or hear the voice in the words. James Moffett in Teaching the Universe of Discourse suggests that students can not hear their voices because they have not learned the concept of authentic discourse (193). Beth Neman in Teaching Students to Write believes that the issue may instead be one of guiding students to recognize the nuances of voice or tone in their written work (217). In essence, Neman believes they must first become conscious of their speaking selves in their writing before they can learn to vary their voices for specific audiences (214). Therefore, in an effort to encourage student to hear their own written voices and the voices of their classmates, I begin the first day of each upper division writing class by discussing voice and tone, rather than reviewing the syllabus. I then request a writing sample for the purpose of peer review pairing. The assigned topic is to examine how they feel about writing. As I explain to them, I will read their 20-minute "quick write" not for structure, grammar, punctuation or spelling, but for the primary purpose of pairing compatible voices. While at first I thought this activity might inhibit their authentic voice, I have since discovered that the reflective nature of the topic strengthened the use of their personal voice.

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Since peer review seems to be more threatening at the university level than at the elementary level, I assure them that my crystal internal ear has never failed me yet. While perhaps with some concern that their professor

hears "voice," they, nonetheless, write on their feelings and experiences about writing.

On the second day of class, I announce the pairs. As they talk with their new peer partner, they are keenly listening to the tone of the vocal voice of their appointed partner, no doubt trying to ascertain what compatibility I "heard" in the written voice. After they have talked together for thirty minutes, I ask each student to introduce his or her partner to the entire class. They are always amazed to discover the mutual interests they share or the fact that they both have had the same course, yet never recognized each other. It is at this point I share anonymous stories of previous successful pairings with them.

For example, two years ago I paired two women (Tracey and Cheri) together. Afterwards, they became such close friends that they commuted together and took the same courses together before they graduated. In Tracey's quick write, she wrote the following:

> Writing is something I've enjoyed since elementary school. I had an experience in the 3rd grade which probably helped to form my love of writing. There was a book fair in which the students were invited to write their own book. This was an optional activity and was not part of any class assignment. I decided to write a book and submitted it when I finished. The name of my book was <u>The Best Little City in the State: Milpitas, California.</u> I couldn't have been more proud of this book and wasn't concerned about winning the fair. As it turned out, my book won first prize out of all of the schools in my county. It was probably one of the most exciting events of my life and, of course, my

> whole family was there to cheer me on. From that point on, I knew I was given a wonderful gift -- the skill of writing.

Cheri, with whom I paired Tracey, wrote the following:

> As far back as I can remember, I have always taken great joy in creating stories in my mind and once I learned to write, I began putting those stories down on paper. I told my parents I was going to be a writer when I grew up, and they were always supportive and loved reading the stories I wrote.

There are, of course, similar recollections in their responses. Both students have a positive attitude toward writing as a result of an elementary school experience; both students had supportive parents. Beyond these similarities, however, the voices that can be heard are confident, with a confirmed belief in their abilities. Their voices suggest an open receptiveness to comments by others, as well as a certitude to provide appropriate feedback to a partner. Their voices are clearly heard, not hesitant, and there is a willingness to accept challenge and to experience the recognition that occurs with accomplishment.

At the end of each semester I request each student to comment about the peer relationship in her dialogue journal. As it turned out, these two women were exceptionally compatible. They were both sensitive listeners and thoughtful responders. They were candid with each other and receptive to suggestions from the other. Tracey began a newsletter that semester for the Student California Teachers Association (SCTA), and Cheri became a regular contributor to the publication. Subsequently, both students planned to teach at the elementary level; both women took Children's Literature together and they also commuted together.

The following semester I paired Allison and Stephanie together based on the following written samples:

Allison: How I feel about Writing.

> This question has come at a perfect time in my life. Truthfully, I have always anticipated a writing assignment. Whenever I take a course where writing is required I get nervous, stressed and typically overwhelmed. I have always felt that my vocabulary has never been very rich or fancy. I have thought that my personal thoughts are too superficial. I want to overcome this feeling.

Stephanie wrote:

> Creative or reflective writing makes me nervous and very self conscious. I feel paralyzed with the fear of what to write. I manage to get an uneasy feeling when asked to choose a topic to write about or to write on a personal level. The hardest roadblock for myself is finding something that I want to write about and something that I feel will be worthy.

Unlike Tracey and Cheri, Allison and Stephanie were insecure in their writing ability and self-conscious about exposing their work to others which might result in negative criticism. In fact, they anticipated negative criticism and were plagued with self-doubts. They clearly viewed writing as an indicator of intelligence and lacked confidence in their abilities to measure up to society's standard. Neither student revealed any incident that might have contributed to these negative feelings, perhaps another indicator of their sense of inadequacies. The voices I heard from these two students were a tentative plea for compassion and understanding. They were essentially saying, "Please don't force us to write about personal

experiences and expose ourselves to ridicule." Yet both writers exhibited control of language and a fluent voice in expressing their insecurities, in addition to sufficient confidence to express their fears to me.

Both women were in their early twenties, attractive and engaged to marry after graduation. I later discovered both were native Californians from small communities in the central San Joaquin Valley, and neither had siblings. In their peer review sessions, they sought distant corners of the room to confer and seemed to cling to each other for support, much like a drowning person will cling to any flotsam that floats by. They did not contribute during class discussions unless directly addressed, yet the peer review process because a positive experience for them. They were both particularly conscious of each others choice of words, and each student readily accepted the suggestion of the other.

As a final example of this pairing process, I have selected two women I paired together last fall. While one member of the pair, Jane, was perhaps ten or more years older than Lisa, after they were paired, they were amazed at the similarities in their experiences and interests. Jane wrote the following comments:

> I am a great advocate of the art of letter writing. There is no greater gift than to share with another human, via a written message, one's thoughts, feelings, and concerns. While this form of communication has depended upon a physical act of pen to paper and placement of the envelope into the postal system, it now is changing. E-mail is forcing us to somewhat redefine letter writing. While this form of communication is indeed the wave of the future, it will take time to convince me of its lasting

value. One of life's greatest joys for me is to correspond with someone in letter form.

Lisa wrote the following:

> It's funny but I have always enjoyed writing. I wrote poems as a young teenager which probably helped me to sort out all of the confusion of growing up. High school years were fun being in the Honor's classes all four years. We tore apart poems, plays, stories, and even movies. Unfortunately, the Honor's classes which were suppose to be 'college prep' classes didn't prepare me for MLA style nor did they prepare me for 5 paragraph essays. I was terribly frustrated with Freshman Comp. class. I went in like a know-it-all because I had college prep classes -- I knew what I was doing! I remember many nights crying out of frustration in front of my old little word processor. I would love to write books someday. Not novels but information books for women. I went through a very difficult, painful 2 years of marriage. I wrote in a journal to release my anger and pain. I would love to pass on my experiences in a book to other women going through those same painful events in their lives. It helps to know that they are not alone, not crazy, and there are solutions or even a light at the end of the tunnel.

While Lisa's voice is more confidently revealing than Jane's, both ended their "quick write" with a personal aside. Lisa wrote, "Whew -- I think that is all!" and Jane wrote, "Wish me luck" and drew a happy face in place of a period. My grouping of these two women was not based on any situational evidence, but on their voices which indicated a sound sense of

self. Whatever they had experienced in life, they had emerged with a mature understanding of the power of the written word. They knew the joy that follows frustration and the satisfaction that flows from effort.

As I observed them throughout the semester, I noticed that whenever I attempted to add another member to their pair (because of an absence of a peer partner on conferencing days), they consistently found ways to exclude other members. They were both aware that they wrote well and their sharing had become synergistic. They did not want any outside influence to disrupt the energy field they had created.

At the end of that semester, I again asked students to comment about their peer review experience. Jane wrote the following in her journal:

> The peer review process helped in many ways. It was helpful to be paired with a fellow writer who could give constructive comments and advice. Often she found little errors in grammar that I, being too familiar with the work, perhaps read right over. Having in the past neither friend nor family member to help edit my work, I depend on personal rereading to catch flaws. Having a peer reviewer to preread was added insurance. While I always took all suggestions under consideration, I did not always follow them, for sometimes I felt the proposed draft additions or subtractions were not in keeping with my initial intentions. This was an issue with the first two papers more so than with the I-Search paper. However, this always was helpful, for I then was forced to recognize why I did not want to change my paper and thus, it helped clarify my own purpose. The peer review process

was a positive experience for me. I especially enjoyed working with Lisa.

Whether the students were accomplished writers or developing writers, all of them (except one) had extremely positive feelings about the process and their mutual contributions to the peer pair. The one negative response came from a student who felt his partner was too judgmental. As I later discovered, his partner assumed the role of editor rather than reviewer.

While I can not quantify this process, I believe the activity can be replicated. And, in fact, I do every semester. We can demonstrate this magic of voice by examining the language of Huck Finn for phrases that convey his naiveté or passages from Steinbeck's Travels with Charlie which denote a friendly traveler, concerned about others. More importantly, we can demonstrate the significance of voice by encouraging students to listen to their partner's written voice in order to find their own.

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